



## THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN<sup>1</sup>

— LYNNE KNIGHT

When Rodin first felt the looseness  
of the white Dominican robe Balzac wore  
to write in, his hands went still in the clay.

He stood for a long while, learning  
the cloth's heavy fall, letting it find its way  
to Balzac's hands, which would hold the robe

closed from within, simplifying the figure  
until nothing human would be noticed but  
the head in its defiance of a bronze repose.

Months later, when the Salon scorned—  
obese monstrosity; colossal foetus—  
Rodin stood in the recess of his studio

embracing one of the maquettes,  
feeling all the way back to the heat  
of hands in the clay, his own,

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Balzac's. At the time of his death,  
Balzac's body was a ruin, according  
to the Goncourts a belly with a profile

like the ace of spades, though he was  
only fifty-one. Yet nothing like kindness  
led Rodin to drape the figure. It wasn't

about hiding the ugly sausages of torso,  
arms and legs. He needed a man impatient  
for great motion—dressed loosely,

striding from the scene.

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Lynne Knight is the author of six full-length poetry collections, and of six chapbooks. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *Poetry* and *Southern Review*. Her awards and honors include publication in *Best American Poetry*, a *Prix de l'Alliance Française*, a PSA Lucille Medwick Memorial Award, a *RATTLE* Poetry Prize, and an NEA grant. *I Know (Je sais)*, her translation with the author Ito Naga of his *Je sais*, appeared in 2013. She lives on Vancouver Island.